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Nation's Restaurant News®

THE NEWSWEEKLY OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

SECOND CLASS

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NRN Photo

Going back to the basics at their new, casual Vinny's restaurant in Chicago are, from left, Marty Fosse and Charlie and Joe Carlucci.

Vinny's leads Carlucci Group into casual dinner-house niche

by Carolyn Walkup

CHICAGO — Vinny's, The Carlucci Hospitality Group's casual entry into the burgeoning neighborhood Italian restaurant category, broadens this up-and-coming operator's scope beyond its reputation for Italian fine dining.

Vinny's is a departure from the group's two Carlucci restaurants, both of which are high-end, destination spots. Vinny's, which is meant to recreate the timeless mom-and-pop neighborhood restaurants of New York's Little Italy, runs check averages of $17, compared with $25 and $30 at the two Carlucci's.

At Vinny's the tablecloths are red- and white-checked instead of white linen, the wine glasses don't have stems, the napkins are paper and most of the menu is written on blackboards. The pasta is called spaghetti and typically comes with red sauce.

With Vinny's becoming

(See VINNY'S, page 57)

Prather joins Furr's/Bishop's

Former Hardee's head strives to resuscitate ailing chain

by Milford Prewitt

LUBBOCK, Texas — William Prather, former president of Hardee's Food Systems and a veteran of turnaround efforts at two chains, has been named president and chief executive officer of beleaguered cafeteria operator Furr's/ Bishop's.

Prather

Prather, who resigned from Hardee's seven months ago, had been a consultant to Lubbock-based Furr's/ Bishop's for weeks before his appointment by chairman Michael Levenson.

"Bill Prather's innovative leadership and successful track record in our industry enable him to immediately assume management of day-to-day operations while directing the company toward healthy, long-term growth," Levenson said in a statement.

Prather downplayed the magnitude of the challenge he faces at the 120-unit cafeteria operation.

"Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment, but I don't see this

(See PRATHER, page 57)

Domino's shutters 45, eyes 55 more

by Theresa Howard

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Domino's Pizza has shuttered 45 poorly performing stores and is targeting another 55 closings as part of The Bottom 100 project.

The program marks the first mass unit shutdown in the company's 31-year history and pinpoints about 40 franchised and 60 company-owned stores, according to spokesman Mike Jenkins. The plan is designed to close unprofitable outlets by the end of this year, he said.

Domino's pulled the plug on 45 units in January. The balance of the targeted stores are being granted one final opportunity for rebound before being closed. In addition, it closed 14 units in December independently of the project.

"Those low-performing stores affected systemwide profitability" said Jenkins, who

(See DOMINO'S, page 7)

Red Lobster jettisons value menu, returns to traditional choices

by Carolyn Walkup

ORLANDO, Fla. — While still seeking to maintain a value image, Red Lobster has deep-sixed the 22-entrée value menu it introduced last year and returned to a more traditional selection.

The seafood dinner-house chain found that a specially priced entrée selection was not practical.

"It changed preferences, increased waste and made inventory control more difficult," said spokeswoman Anne Powell Durning.

The 22 entrées had previously been priced at $9.95 each.

The current regular dinner menu contains seven items less than $10 that are mixed in with higher-priced entrées — the same number that appeared on the chain's previous menu. And with fewer choices offered, food waste and preparation time have been reduced.

Check averages have been unaffected by the menu changes, Durning said. "Value has to be a key ingredient in any aspect of the menu," she added.

(See RED LOBSTER, page 57)

INSIDE

Revive spirits by visiting students

NRN Editorial:
Rick Van Warner/Page 23

Jenkins ousted from Metromedia

by Bill Carlino

DAYTON, Ohio — J. Michael Jenkins, president and chief executive of Metromedia Steakhouses Inc., the operator of the Bonanza and Ponderosa chains, has exited from the 1,100-unit budget steak-house concern after he was informed that his contract would not be renewed.

Jenkins

A spokesman for parent Metromedia Co. labeled Jenkins' departure a "mutual decision" between Jenkins and Stuart Sabotnick, the vice president and chief operating officer of MSI parent Metromedia Inc. — a diversified company based in East Rutherford, N.J. Billionaire John Kluge owns Metromedia.

Jenkins did not return phone calls. He will remain as a consultant to MSI until his contract expires on May 31.

To fill the void, Metromedia has tapped Michael Kaufman as acting president. He is a managing director of Kluge & Co., an investment subsidiary of Metromedia Co.

In addition to Ponderosa

(See JENKINS, page 56)

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NEWS BRIEFS

Jan. sales hit three-year high; food costs fall

WASHINGTON — In a sign that the recession's grip on the restaurant industry may be loosening, the rate of sales' increase at the nation's eating and drinking places in January hit a three-year high, rising 10.12 percent on an annual unadjusted basis, the Census Bureau reported.

In light of last year's Persian Gulf War and viewer fascination with televised coverage — which drove customer counts down — the upbeat numbers in January are largely a result of easy comparisons. Still, December's restaurant sales were also strong, up 7.09 percent on an annual unadjusted basis, the bureau reported. In November restaurant sales climbed 4.92 percent.

Adding more encouragement, the Labor Department reported that wholesale food costs continued to fall in January, declining 1.8 percent on an unadjusted annual basis as meat products took the steepest price dives. The cost of beef fell 8.8 percent while that of chicken dropped 5 percent on a year-to-year unadjusted basis. Cheese products were up in January, rising 6.8 percent.

CRA pushes reform initiative to fight doctors' measure

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Angered by the California Medical Association's push for a ballot measure that would force employers to pay for workers' and their dependents' health insurance, the California Restaurant Association has filed an initiative to reform the state's health-care industry.

Jo-Linda Thompson, the CRA's director of legislative affairs, said the association's ballot measure would require doctors to turn treatment and cost data over to the state for analysis, limit physicians' charges, force doctors to take MediCal and MediCare patients and accept government reimbursement for their treatment as payment in full, and permit hospitals to hire doctors as employees. It would also restrict physicians' referring patients to associates in subsidiaries and use doctors' license fees to fund a medical fraud unit in the state attorney general's office.

In a related development, California state Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi recently outlined a proposal for creating a $34 billion regional health-care system that would derive three-fourths of its funding from employers.

Shafer named Dunkin' prexy

RANDOLPH, Mass. — John D. "Jack" Shafer Jr., a 20-year veteran executive of Dunkin' Donuts and its former senior vice president of development and operations, has been named president of Dunkin' Donuts USA.

Shafer fills a post that had been vacant since Thomas Schwarz left the Dunkin' domestic-system presidency nearly two years ago, when Britain's Allied-Lyons Plc. acquired the company. Last fall Shafer also assumed responsibility for domestic marketing of the 2,000-plus unit doughnut and sandwich chain.

Le Peep's Rhoads buys out Jacobs

DENVER — In a deal with majority shareholder and creditor Eli S. Jacobs, Le Peep Restaurants Inc. chairman Mitchell E. Rhoads has acquired all of the company's common stock, preferred stock and notes payable. The terms of Rhoads' buyout of Jacobs were not disclosed.

Rhoads is the former Burger King executive brought in by Jacobs in 1989 to run the ailing breakfast-specialty chain. Despite reductions in company-store operating costs and administrative expenses under the Rhoads regime, 9-year-old Le Peep has defied efforts to reposition it into a multidaypart performer.

Le Peep, which has never turned a profit, operates 18 restaurants and franchises 36 others. The company closed 11 units in recent months and said it would shutter more unprofitable outlets.

REGI to appeal $596,000 age-bias award to waitress

LOS ANGELES — Restaurant Enterprises Group Inc. has posted a $1 million bond to appeal a $596,000 damage award and job reinstatement ruling won by Lisa Belanger, a 51-year-old waitress who successfully sued the company for age discrimination.

"We did not get a fair trial, and we intend to vigorously appeal," said Charles Peterson, a lawyer for the Irvine, Calif.-based chain operator.

The judge's citation of federal statutes in granting Belanger's post-trial motion for reinstatement may be the first such state court ruling on record.

In other news, the company said it would close its Carrows chain's headquarters in Santa Barbara, Calif., and merge it into the company's family-restaurant division offices in Irvine to speed the conversion of 107 newly acquired restaurants in California.

The move this summer will permit a more "cohesive" conversion of the Bob's Big Boy and Allie's units into the Carrows and Coco's family concepts over the next three years, division president Barry Krantz said.

The $66 million acquisition from Marriott Corp. includes about 95 Big Boys and boosts REGI's 25-state system to 607 restaurants with annualized sales nearing $1 billion. Both Coco's and Carrows, which company officials have said are among REGI's sales-growth leaders, would get about half of the converted units, bringing Coco's total to about 180 and Carrows' to about 165.

National plans new pizza, taco kiosks after Ch. 11 cuts

HOUSTON — National Convenience Stores said it would continue with plans to add licensed Pizza Hut and Taco Bell kiosks to more than 200 of its 860 Stop N Go C-stores despite the company's recent closure of 126 outlets as a preliminary step in Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization.

NCS said it has targeted up to another 110 stores for closure by April 1.

The company filed for court protection from creditors in December, the same month it posted a $177 million second-quarter loss.

NY White Castles test table service

NEW YORK — White Castle, the 260-unit fast-food chain known for small, square, low-priced burgers with steamed onions, has begun testing limited table service in the New York metropolitan area.

Numbered signs issued by cashiers identify seated customers to kitchen workers who bring their orders to the table. "It's a version of indoor carhop service," said an area supervisor who is monitoring the test.

An in-line unit on Long Island is one of several White Castles testing the new service in the chain's 50-unit New York market. A spokesman said the company has not yet assessed customer responses or prospects for a wider rollout.

NJ amending egg law to end sunnyside-up ban

TRENTON, N.J. — State lawmakers are amending a controversial state health regulation briefly prohibiting restaurateurs from serving eggs not cooked to a 140-degree minimum.

The law, which restricts the pooling of eggs in order to reduce the potential spread of salmonella contamination, also makes it technically illegal to serve most soft-boiled and sunnyside-up egg orders.

Though the more lenient amendment will not be effective until May 1, health officials indicated they would not enforce the current regulation until it is revised.

Bertucci Pizza plots delivery, takeout debut

WOBURN, Mass. — Bertucci Inc., the 26-unit operator of the full-service Bertucci's Brick Oven Pizzeria chain here, has slated the midsummer debut of a 2,000-square-foot delivery and takeout-only prototype called Bertucci Menucci.

Currently, delivery and takeout generate about 25 percent of the regional chain's business. Bertucci, which went public last year, projects annual per-unit sales of $700,000 from the downsized prototype.

FINANCIAL NEWS

PepsiCo profits up despite losses, charges

by Alan Liddle

PURCHASE, N.Y. — Despite a drag on earnings from KFC's plummeting bottom line and the chain's $34 million restructuring charge in the fourth quarter, PepsiCo Inc.'s restaurant division managed a 10-percent gain in operating profits, to $576 million, for the year ended Dec. 28.

PepsiCo said aggregate worldwide sales for its Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and KFC divisions rose 14 percent, to $7.1 billion, over their prior-year results.

In comparison, PepsiCo's overall sales grew 10 percent, to $19.6 billion, in 1991 while its net income was flat at $1.1 billion — suppressed by a total of $170 million in write-offs for KFC and the restructuring of PepsiCo's snack foods group.

The restaurant group's fourth-quarter operating profits — hammered by KFC's net $10.9 million loss — dipped 13 percent, to $135.9 million. Restaurant sales were up 15 percent, to $2.2 billion, during the period.

"1991 was an important year for PepsiCo," chairman Wayne Calloway observed. "In one of the most difficult environments we've seen in a decade, we were able to achieve a solid gain in ongoing profits. International performance was particularly impressive in soft drinks and restaurants."

With write-offs excluded, PepsiCo said, worldwide restaurant operating profits would have grown 12 percent on the year and 2 percent during the quarter. The group's overall net income for the year would have risen 10 percent.

Pizza Hut was the restaurant-division profit leader in 1991; operating profits were up 34 percent, to $89.8 million, for the quarter and up 28 percent, to $314.5 million, for the year.

Pizza Hut was the restaurant-division profit leader in 1991 with operating profits up 28 percent for the year.

Sales at Pizza Hut grew 11 percent, to $1 billion, for the quarter and 10 percent, to $3.3 billion, for the year, on a 1-percent rise in same-store sales for both periods, the company said. It credited sales growth to an increasing number of delivery-carryout units and the "strong volume gains" associated with such units but added that the results were "partially offset by a decline in traditional stores."

At Taco Bell sales increased 17 percent for the quarter, to $655.1 million, while profits expanded by a more modest 5 percent, to $57 million. For the year Taco Bell's sales climbed 17 percent, to $2 billion, and its operating profits increased by 21 percent, to $180.6 million.

PepsiCo officials said Taco Bell's profitability in the fourth quarter resulted from "volume gains and additional units, partially offset by lower pricing, higher advertising costs, strategic spending for market manager hiring and training, new concepts and advanced computer systems."

Same-store sales for domestic, company-operated Taco Bell restaurants increased 4 percent in the quarter and 5 percent for the year, PepsiCo sources indicated.

On the international front, PepsiCo's restaurants reported a 44-percent quarterly rise in profits, to $30.8 million, and a jump in sales of 27 percent, to $289.8 million. For the year foreign outlets saw operating profits increase 28 percent, to $96.2 million, while sales grew 27 percent, to $868.5 million.

As a whole, the company's domestic restaurant operations reported a 13-percent hike in sales, to about $2 billion, but experienced a 22-percent drop in profits, to $105.1 million, primarily as a result of the problems at KFC. Operating profits rose 7 percent, to $479.4 million, for the year, and sales increased by 13 percent, to $6.3 billion.

Even excluding the $34 million restructuring charge that resulted in a loss for the quarter, KFC would have suffered a 33-percent drop in operating profits against a 19-percent increase in sales.

The chicken chain's reported operating profits for the year plummeted 37 percent, to $80.5 million, on a 20-percent rise in sales, to $1.8 billion.

PepsiCo officials said same-store sales at KFC were down 7 percent for the quarter and flat for the year.

"I think restructuring will make management leaner, but I'm not quite sure what they can do [to salvage] this year," Joseph J. Doyle, managing director of Smith Barney Inc. in New York, said. "I've maintained for some time that KFC will not mount a meaningful turnaround until it comes out with a 'healthful' [non-fried] chicken product. . . . That is still 12 to 18 months in the future."

FOOD PRICE OUTLOOK

Tight supplies may force beef to rise

by Patt Patterson

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's latest survey of cattle found that herds had increased only 1 percent from last year's figure and that the number of cattle on feedlots is down. As a result, the price of **beef** has started to rise and soon could move up to, or beyond, its average level for 1991, depending upon continued consumer demand.

There's a large supply of warmwater **lobster tails** in importers' freezers. But the inventory of cold-water tails is tight and may get tighter. Expect prices on cold-water tails to move higher until at least midspring.

Some agricultural economists expect the U.S.D.A.'s late March survey of farmers' tomato-planting intentions to show the acreage of processing **tomatoes** cut back sharply from the records set for the past three years. There's an oversupply of **canned tomatoes** and **tomato paste** overhanging the market with prices at the lowest levels in 10 years, but consumption has not increased. Expect prices to stay low until early summer although there may be some upward movement if the survey shows expected cuts.

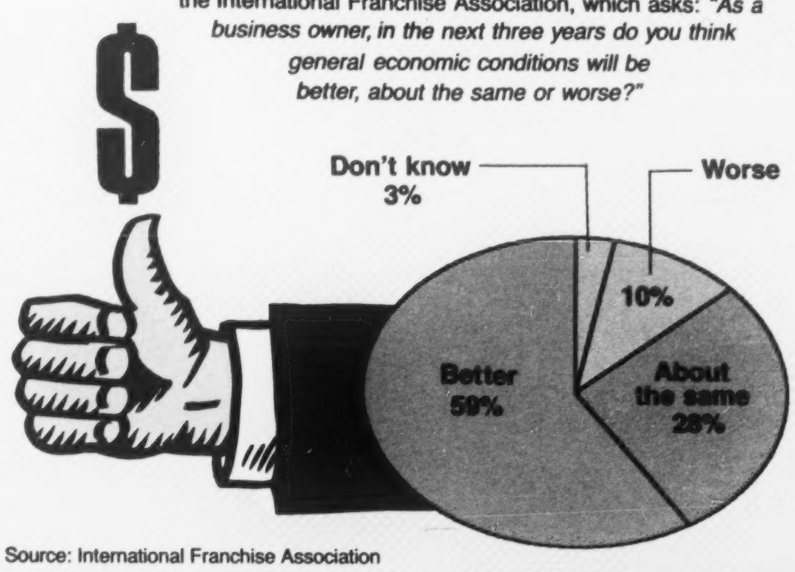
Heavy rains at midmonth slowed and even halted harvesting of many **vegetables** in California but otherwise did little damage to either vegetable or **fruit** producers. The increase in the snow pack in Northern California promised the state's farmers there greater water supplies for the coming summer — after five years of continual drought.

Frozen spinach is in tight supply, but California packers should start production in the next few days. The Western pack is not expected to relieve the shortage totally, so prices may remain at or near present levels . . . **Frozen asparagus** is also in short supply, but commitments by packers seem to be running ahead of last year's. It's too early to get a fix on prices . . . Most packers recently hiked prices on **frozen Brussels sprouts** because of tight supplies.

FACT FILE

It's got to get better; it can't get worse!

Operators are thinking positively according to a poll taken by the International Franchise Association, which asks: *"As a business owner, in the next three years do you think general economic conditions will be better, about the same or worse?"*



Source: International Franchise Association

FINANCIAL DIGEST

TW narrows 4Q loss to $4.3 million

SPARTANBURG, S.C. — TW Holdings Inc., blaming non-cash charges and interest expenses from its 1989 acquisition of TW Services Inc., reported net losses of $4.3 million in the fourth quarter and $67.6 million for all of fiscal 1991.

The company lost $5.7 million in the prior year's fourth quarter and sustained a virtually identical $67.8 million net loss for all of 1990.

TW said lower commodity prices and tighter cost controls helped narrow the fourth-period loss. Higher sales at TW's Denny's and Hardee's units boosted fourth-quarter revenues slightly to $898 million, from $890 million in the comparable period of 1990.

Revenues for all of 1991 declined 0.3 percent, to $3.6 billion, TW said.

Interest costs trim Consolidated's 1Q net

INDIANAPOLIS — Consolidated Products, owner of the Steak N Shake chain, said interest expenses from the company's 1991 recapitalization program contributed to an 18-percent decline in first-quarter net income, to $929,000, on a 3-percent gain in sales, to $27.8 million.

The quarterly dip followed Consolidated's record results for the fourth quarter ended Sept. 25, during which the company's earnings before interest and taxes jumped 11 percent, to $2.8 million, aiding a preinterest earnings leap of 7 percent for the full year, to $10.9 million.

Apple South scores record annual results

MADISON, Ga. — In its first annual report since becoming a publicly held company last November, Apple South Inc. reported a 79-percent gain in earnings, to $1.8 million, on a 16-percent increase in revenues, to $67.6 million, for the year ended Dec. 31.

Apple, a 43-unit franchisee of Applebee's Neighborhood Grill and Bar and a 10-unit Hardee's operator, attributed its strong year-end results to improved unit-level operations and expansion. Same-store sales rose 2.8 percent in the fourth quarter, reversing a 5-percent decrease in comparable-store sales through the third quarter.

"I am pleased with the operating performance and earnings growth experienced in 1991, particularly in light of the difficult economic conditions," said Tom E. Dupree, Apple South's chairman and chief executive.

The company, the largest Applebee's franchisee and the holder of development rights for the concept in 15 Southeastern states, said it intends to open 10 to 12 new Applebee's during 1992.

Checker's expansion boosts annual results

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Checkers Drive-In Restaurants nearly doubled its annual net income in the year ended Dec. 31, to $3.3 million, on an 84-percent gain in revenues, to $42.2 million, compared with the chain's 1990 performance.

Checkers said its performance was enhanced by franchised and company store expansion, combined with improved same-store sales results.

In the 12-week fourth quarter, net income jumped 155 percent, to $1.4 million, on a 100-percent gain in revenues, to $14.8 million, compared with the year-ago period. Systemwide sales during the year rose 104 percent, to $73.5 million.

"The record sales and earnings were the result of quality franchise growth, continued strong company operations and Checkers' continued commitment to increasing the number of company-owned and operated restaurants," chairman Herbert G. Brown said of the 117-unit chain in a prepared statement.

Brown predicted that 30 company-operated restaurants would open in 1992.

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Cocotas joins TCBY Systems

by Robin Lee Allen

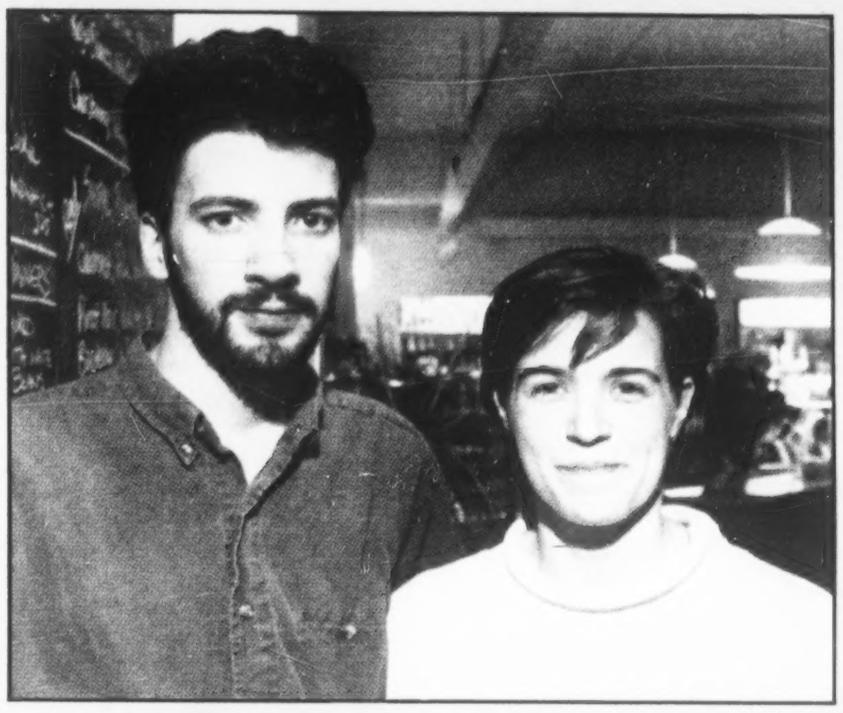
LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Freshly exited from his roost as president of Boston Chicken, Charles A. Cocotas has found a new perch as president and chief executive of TCBY Systems, the franchising and operating subsidiary of TCBY Enterprises Inc.

His appointment marks the first time that the flagging frozen-yogurt franchisor's top executives have gone outside of their ranks to fill an upper-management position, signaling a shift from previously guarded proprietorship to one of necessary compromise, according to industry observers.

In the past several years, TCBY Enterprises' founder, chairman and majority stockholder Frank D. Hickingbotham, and his son, Herren Hickingbotham, TCBY Enterprises' president, have watched their explosive growth of the 1980s stall as a proliferation of frozen-yogurt outlets heated competition and melted their sales, profits and franchise relations.

Industry veteran Cocotas, 56, now has been handed the hefty responsibility of overseeing the operations of TCBY's more than 1,650 franchised and company-owned stores and several non-traditional outlets

(See COCOTAS, page 51)



NRN Photo

John and Caprial Pence inside their casual-themed Westmoreland Bistro in Portland, Ore.

Pence duo wears many hats as owners of Westmoreland Bistro

by Alan Liddle

PORTLAND, Ore. — When Caprial and John Pence were co-chefs at the award-winning Fullers in Seattle, their haute creations were presented to guests by a swarm of servers in surroundings often compared to a contemporary art museum.

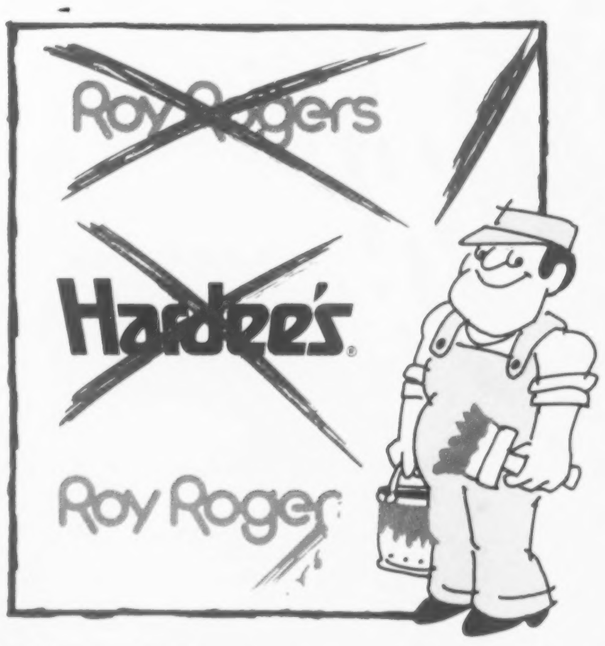
Today, as owners of the 32-seat Westmoreland Bistro here, this husband-and-wife team often leave the cooking to others while they seat customers, make espresso or work the cash register.

The Pences no longer have the time to fan sliced salmon fil-

(See PENCES, page 51)

Hardee's reconverts 200 Roy's

by Milford Prewitt



WASHINGTON — Every former Roy Rogers roast beef and chicken restaurant in Baltimore and Washington, purchased by Hardee's and converted into Hardee's units, is slated to have the Roy Rogers menu and kitchen equipment reinstalled.

At the same time Roy Rogers exterior signage will be replaced on as many as two-thirds of the 200 units in the markets, with some signs completely devoid of any affiliation with Hardee's.

The dramatic about-face comes just three weeks after Hardee's confirmed that it had returned the original menu, equipment, fixing bars and signage of Roy Rogers to two Washington units that had been converted from Roy's into Hardee's.

While the reconversions at the first two units were initially described as a test, the company has revealed a broader mission that borders on reversing much of the remodeling it has done in the market to date.

Maurice Bridges, a company spokesman, confirmed that Hardee's has been involved in a

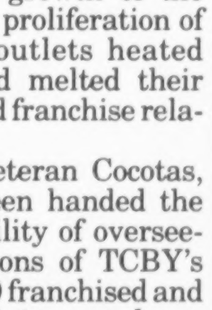
(See HARDEE'S, page 4)

F '91 performance blunts Hardee's comeback hopes

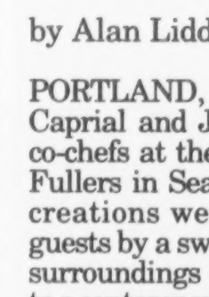
See story on page 14

IFMA honors 9 leaders as '92 Silver Platers

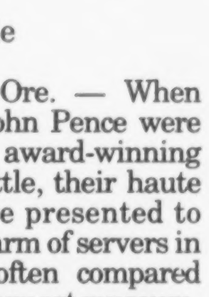
by Rick Van Warner



Regas



Rosenberg



Slocum

CHICAGO — Disney World foodservice pioneer Larry Slocum, longtime Dunkin Donuts chief Robert Rosenberg, and Knoxville, Tenn., independent restaurateur William Regas are among nine industry leaders who have been selected to receive prestigious Silver Plate awards.

Unlike the executive suite turnover typical of the industry in recent years, the trio collectively has logged nearly 100 years of commercial foodservice experience — solely with their respective companies.

Other International Foodservice Manufacturers Association 1992 Silver Plate winners chosen here were Peter Hothorn, Omni Hotels senior vice president of food and beverage; Thomas Lackmann, president of Lackmann Food Service; William Lembach, director of Food

(See IFMA, page 50)

INSIDE

Getting creative with 'complex' appetizers
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Operators may pre-empt FDA regulations
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Budapest's Gundel: Lang's 'pot of gold'
Fine Dining/Pages 27-34

McCann resigns as COO of Riese

Will remain as consultant, pursue private ventures after 6-year tenure

by Peter O. Keegan

McCann

NEW YORK — After spending six years as the operational backbone of The Riese Organization, Vincent McCann has stepped down as chief operating officer of the New York-based multiconcept franchising empire.

"I resigned because I felt that it was time to move on; it was a friendly parting," explained McCann, 45. "Right now I'm looking at a bunch of different options."

Riese Organization president Dennis Riese has assumed all of McCann's responsibilities, which include overseeing operations at the company's 300 franchised operations, such as Dunkin' Donuts, KFC, Pizza Hut, El Torito, Roy Rogers and Del Taco.

"I'm not especially happy he's leaving," Riese said. "I

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